

STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE JIM GERLACH
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS
CHAIRMAN HENRY BROWN
RANKING MEMBER MICHAEL MICHAUD

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONCERNING

H.R.1516

JUNE 11, 2003

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member and members of the Subcommittee on Benefits, I want to thank you for allowing me to testify before you today on behalf of my bill, H.R.1516.

I have introduced H.R.1516 to establish a new national veterans cemetery in southeast Pennsylvania. This legislation would require the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a new and much-needed cemetery within four years of enactment. It also would provide for local involvement in selecting the site for that cemetery. Under my bill, the Commonwealth's Governor would be able to appoint a blue ribbon commission of state and local leaders—including representatives from local veterans groups—to recommend a suitable site for a veterans cemetery to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The need for a new veterans cemetery in our community is well-documented and long overdue. The Philadelphia National Cemetery is virtually closed, with exception to cremated remains, to the nearly 400,000 veterans that reside in the five counties that make up metropolitan Philadelphia. While cremation maybe an alternative to traditional burial for some, it is not the preference of most. But unfortunately, it is the only option that the Philadelphia area veterans currently have if they want their remains reposed at a veterans cemetery close to home. The only other national cemetery in our region is the

Indiantown Gap National Cemetery, which is a long drive from the Philadelphia area and can be a very difficult trip for widows, widowers and other family members who want to visit the graves of their loved ones. I would note that more than 290,000 area veterans live over 65 miles from the Indiantown Gap National Cemetery.

During a recent field hearing of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, chaired by my colleague, Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi expressed his support for the establishment of a new cemetery in southeastern Pennsylvania after analyzing two factors that were not taken into account in a previous Veterans Affairs Department study. The Beverly National Cemetery in nearby Burlington County, New Jersey is filling up faster than expected and is only available to New Jersey veterans. Additionally, the Department recently added Monroe County to the greater Philadelphia service area, thereby increasing the number of veterans in need to over 170,000, the statistical benchmark for the establishment of a new cemetery. Secretary Principi also acknowledged that the Indiantown Gap National Cemetery in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania is at least 80 miles from Philadelphia, which contrasts the Department's guideline of having a veterans cemetery within 75 miles of a veteran's home. Consequently, Secretary Principi expressed his support for a new cemetery to honor those who will be laid to rest there. This legislation will both provide for its establishment within a specified period of time and allow for the input of our local officials and veterans to determine its specific site.

The importance of a veterans cemetery in the southeastern Pennsylvania region has already been recognized. The 37th Congress created the Philadelphia National Cemetery when they initially established what has become a large network of national cemeteries across the United States. Southeastern Pennsylvania veterans of today, as those of the past, should likewise have the opportunity to be buried close to home after providing the same level of heroic service and sacrifice to our nation.

Again, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of H.R.1516 and ask that you favorably report my bill to the full committee.